

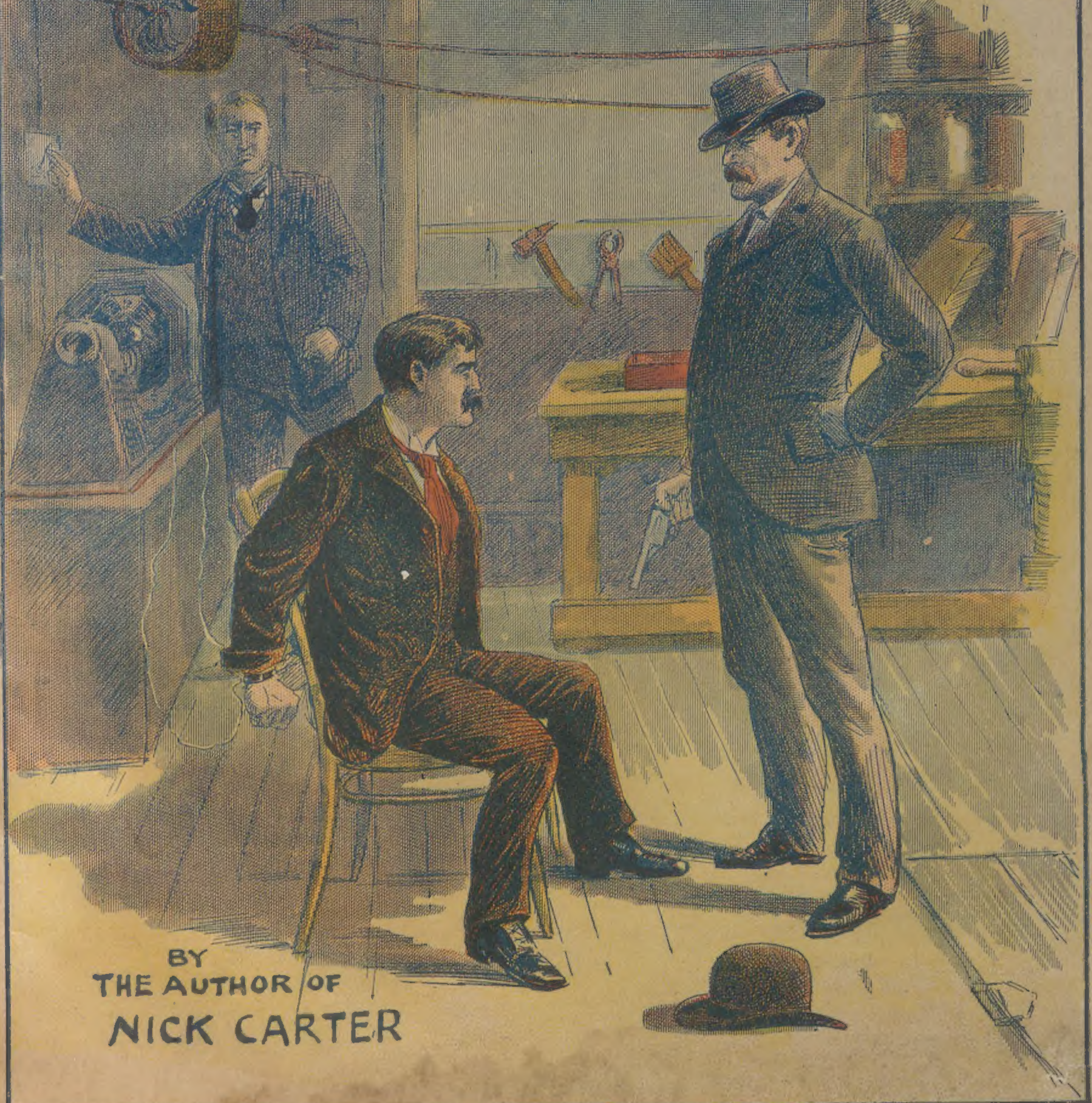
NICK CARTER WEEKLY

Issued weekly. Subscription price \$2.50 per year. Entered as second class matter at the N. Y. Post Office by STREET & SMITH.

No. 157.

Price 5 Cents.

NICK CARTER AS AN EXPERT A BATTERY THAT WAS TAMPERED WITH



BY
THE AUTHOR OF
NICK CARTER

WITH ONE HAND ON THE SWITCH PLATE THE OPERATOR WAITED FOR THE WORD.

▲ New story, written specially for the Nick Carter Weekly, and will not appear in any other number.

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Entered according to Act of Congress in the year 1899 by Street & Smith, in the Office of the Librarian of Congress,
Washington, D. C.

Entered as second class Matter at the New York, N. Y., Post Office.

Issued weekly.

Subscription price, \$2.50 per year.

December 30, 1899.

No 157. STREET & SMITH, Publishers. NEW YORK. 238 William St., N. Y. 5 Cents

Nick Carter as an Expert

OR,

A BATTERY THAT WAS TAMPERED WITH

By the Author of "NICK CARTER."

CHAPTER I.

"SOMETHING WRONG."

"What's wrong, Chick?"

Nick Carter asked the question in a quick, low tone.

It was just outside of his own house.

The hour was seven in the evening. He was about to enter, when a familiar sound that to no other ears would have been a warning signal, had stayed the latchkey in the grasp of the famous detective.

A hand beckoning from an adjoining doorway instantly attracted Nick's attention.

He knew that it was his assistant who hailed him before he caught sight of his face.

Chick was not given to the display of needless alarm, so the secret service ex-

pert comprehended that there must be a motive—and a strong one—for this somewhat unusual exhibition of mystery.

"What's wrong?" he repeated, coming to Chick's side.

Chick pointed to the door at which Nick had just stood.

"You are going into the house——" he began.

"Certainly."

"I want to post you, first. You will find a visitor there waiting for you," explained Chick. "An armless man."

"A freak?"

"Not in the popular acceptance of the term."

"Not from a museum, then?"

"No, from a bank."

"That sounds professionally promising," said Nick. "A client?"

"He didn't say—I presume he is."

"Well, armless bankers are a possibility, Chick, and have their troubles like the rest of humanity, I suppose."

"Let me explain. At about five o'clock I noticed this person from the window."

"What doing?"

"Watching the house. He wears a short cloak that comes to his waist, and until it swung open, I did not notice that he had no arms."

"What did he do finally?"

"He approached the house, rang the bell——"

"How, Chick?"

"Pressed the button in some ingenious way, to a certainty."

"You answered the call?"

"Personally. He asked for Mr. Nicholas Carter; and he seemed rather relieved than otherwise when I told him that you were not at home."

"Relieved, eh?"

"Manifestly so; in the light of later events, I discerned this more clearly than ever."

"You asked him his business?"

"Of course."

"What was it?"

"He was mysteriously close-mouthed—must see you personally, and all that."

"And probably wanted to know where I could be found?"

"He did want to know just that."

"You told him?"

"I informed him that he might catch you at a certain law office up to five-thirty."

"Where I remained for fully fifteen minutes after that hour," said Nick.

"Those directions seemed to satisfy him. He thanked me, and went away, saying he would certainly overtake you."

"He did not do it, Chick."

"I knew that, for at six sharp he re-appeared."

"Disappointed?"

"Anxious, he acted."

"Acted?"

"Yes—I didn't like the looks of things, somehow."

"His not finding me?"

"His not finding you when he said you had been at the law office, but he was too late to catch you."

"Ah, indeed?"

"Now, as I well knew that five minutes was ample time for him to have reached it—whereas, he had taken a full half hour—I presented this phase of the matter to him."

"And he said?"

"Declared that he had misunderstood my directions at first, and went to quite a different locality."

"His proper memory returning later."

"Exactly. I then told him where he would find you at six-thirty."

Nick nodded.

He had informed Chick of his intended movements when he left the house that afternoon.

This was the detective's custom when not exclusively occupied on some especial case.

"I mentioned Police Headquarters at six forty-five. Again I offered to send for you. No, he would hunt you up. It is now five minutes since he came back."

"He had missed me once more?"

"So he asserted; and although he was sure of you at Police Headquarters, he decided to come here and wait, as I had told him at the start that at seven sharp you would be at home."

"From all of which you deduce, Chick?"

"Follow your own conclusions when I have explained fully."

"Something further, eh?"

"The last time this man went away—I followed him."

"Followed him?"

"I did."

"Where did he go?"

"Straight to the vicinity of the second place where I had directed him."

"To its vicinity only?"

"He did not enter at first."

"What did he do?"

"Took up a position opposite. It is a hotel——"

"Yes, Chick."

"You were conversing with the proprietor in the lobby—in plain view."

"You saw me?"

"And so did this armless man. He waited until you came out, watched you safely around the corner, and then rushed across the street and made pressing inquiry for you at the desk."

"Returning here?"

"As I have told you."

"Why, Chick," observed the detective quietly, "it seems to me that this man was in no hurry to see me?"

"Until a certain time had elapsed."

"Mysterious, that. Well, I will investigate our armless friend at once," announced Nick. "He said he came from a bank, did he?"

"Just now. He professed amazing concern for precious time lost over an urgent matter—a bank matter, 'an important bank matter,' was the way that he put it."

"This strikes me as something new," observed Nick, and passed on his way.

The detective found the visitor whom Chick had described seated in his waiting room.

He was posed on the mere edge of a chair, and he arose with some excitement of manner as Nick entered.

The latter bowed, and looked inquiringly.

"Mr. Carter?" asked his caller.

"Don't you know that?" interrogated Nick.

"Why, no, sir," declared the other, with a perfectly tranquil face. "I have been scouring the city for you for over two hours."

"I am informed that you came here at five o'clock."

"That is so, Mr. Carter."

"If your matter was urgent——"

"Very, sir—very!"

"Indeed—then you should have allowed my attendants to send for me."

"But I hoped to economize time by overtaking you."

"I see!"

"And start you right along."

"Start me right along?" repeated Nick. "For where?"

"The bank."

"What bank?"

"The Royal Trust."

Nick viewed the speaker penetratingly.

Keen, experienced reader of humanity that he was, he was yet unable to fix this man's real status.

His cloak had moved aside, and his crippled condition revealed there was something in the unusual presentation that baffled immediate deductions.

The bank the man had mentioned was one of the most prominent in the city.

"Well, what is the trouble there?" inquired Nick.

"I don't know."

"Don't know?"

"I am simply a messenger. I came from the president of the institution."

"Ah!"

"Mr. Harvey Moss—yes, sir."

That was a great name in financial circles; Nick awaited what was coming next with growing interest.

"What is your message?" he asked.

"To urge you to hurry, Mr. Carter. Mr. Moss is very anxious, and hopes you can come at once. Your delay——"

"My delay?"

"Yes, sir."

"What are you talking about?"

"As he wrote you——"

"As he wrote me?"

"As he wrote you last evening. He wishes to have you look matters over up at the bank."

Nick shook his head slowly; he ran his

hand over the correspondence tray at his side.

"I have received no communication from the gentleman you name," he positively declared.

"He certainly wrote to you."

"The letter has not arrived."

"Then it must have miscarried."

"It looks that way."

"At all events, you can call upon him now?"

"Yes."

"When Mr. Moss sent me, he hoped I would be able to reach you within an hour."

"He is waiting for me now, then?"

"Yes, Mr. Carter."

"At the bank?"

"No, at his residence."

"Give me the number—I will accompany you there at once."

"I am not going in that direction, sir."

"Very well."

"If you would mention, Mr. Carter," said the armless man, "that I have used all due haste in finding you——"

"Certainly. Let me see—you are connected with the bank?"

"Ah! yes, sir—for some time, thanks to Mr. Moss' kind charity."

"And your name is——"

"Brewer, Mr. Carter—Mark Brewer."

Nick's visitor again expressed his concern over the delay, emphasizing the hope that Nick would accredit him with due diligence.

"What do you make of the man?" inquired Chick, entering the room where Nick was as the other left it.

Nick shook his head, while he proceeded to a cabinet and made some changes in his attire.

"I will tell you, Chick, when I come back from seeing the man who sent him," he promised.

"And who is that?"

"Harvey Moss, President of the Royal

Trust. This fellow is simply an attache of the institution."

"In what capacity?"

"I am quite as curious as yourself to know that."

It took Nick half an hour to reach the residence of the banker.

He inquired for Mr. Moss, and was admitted to an apartment half library, half office.

"What name, sir?" inquired the servant.

"You may tell Mr. Moss that I am on business concerned with the bank," replied the detective.

The servant bowed, half satisfied. The door closed; in half a minute it opened again.

"I am Mr. Moss," announced a dignified-looking old gentleman, facing Nick rather inquisitively.

He had evidently been interrupted at his dinner, and he looked as if anxious to dispatch all other business in a hurry.

"I came in response to an intimation that there was some trouble at the bank you wished looked into——" began Nick.

"How!" exclaimed the banker, with a great start.

"I believe that covers it."

"Covers it? Excuse me, sir, but this matter—oh!" interrupted Moss, sharply scanning his visitor, "you are probably from the police—the secret service."

Nick nodded slightly.

"This is unwarranted!" continued the banker, vehemently. "No one has been authorized to interfere in an affair that I wish to keep most secret for the time being."

"But you sent for me?" observed Nick.

"No, sir—that is a mistake! some other official may have taken it on himself to do so. Excuse my brusqueness, but I am worked up over this! I wished a silent, secret investigation. I have made all my arrangements, and have given the

matter into the hands of an especial expert."

Nick was somewhat mystified.

"An expert?" he repeated, starting in to probe the complication of the moment.

"Yes, sir. I beg of you, however much may have been intimated to you of the trouble at the bank, that you will not give it any publicity—the case being in capable hands—the most capable—I think you will agree with me there professionally."

"I see there has been something of a misconception," observed Nick, moving towards the door. "I was sent for, or I should not have come."

"Whoever sent for you had no authority to act."

"I supposed it was yourself."

"I!" exclaimed the banker. "It's a mistake!"

"I see it now."

"I sent for nobody," continued the banker, gratuitously, "except Mr. Carter."

"Mr. Carter?" repeated Nick.

"Yes, Mr. Nicholas Carter."

"He is engaged upon the case?" inquired Nick, light flooding his mind instantaneously.

"Yes," rather proudly announced the banker.

"Since when?"

"Since about six o'clock this evening."

An inscrutable smile crossed the detective's face.

"It's a mistake!" he now announced, in turn.

"How?" spoke the banker, with a show of affronted dignity.

"I said—it's a mistake," repeated Nick, brusquely.

"You doubt my word——" began Moss, with asperity.

"Not at all—only when you say that you have engaged Mr. Nicholas Carter,

you certainly state what I know to be an impossibility."

"Why, sir! not an hour since I interviewed, directed and engaged——"

"Mr. Nicholas Carter?"

"Yes!"

"You should say, rather, that you were made the dupe of some clever impostor claiming to be Mr. Nicholas Carter."

"Do you dare, sir——"

"To say that? Why, yes," nodded Nick, coolly, "being the person most particularly able to back up the statement."

"Sir!"

"For I am Nick Carter!"

CHAPTER II.

NICK CARTER'S DOUBLE.

"You are Nick Carter!"

The famous detective bowed assentingly.

The banker did not believe him—he showed it in manner, voice and face.

He was evidently one of those individuals who found it hard to realize that he ever made a mistake.

"You are that person?" he persisted.

He reached for a card on the top of a desk.

It bore Nick's name in script type.

"I am not of course the person who delivered that card," said Nick, "but I am the only one entitled to answer to that name, I fancy."

"Why, sir! Mr. Carter showed me——"

"Credentials?"

"Certainly!"

"Let me show mine!"

The banker dropped to a chair with a shock.

Nick had flashed a dozen convincing documents before his eyes in his inimitably rapid and yet comprehensive way.

"Sold!" gasped Moss.

"I think you have been duped," assented Nick.

"Fooled!" cried the banker, aghast.

"Please explain."

"Explain!" shouted the banker.

He sprang to his feet and seized Nick's arm, alive with keen excitement.

"This way—with me, I beg of you!" he exclaimed.

Nick allowed his host to lead him into the hall.

The banker ran for his hat and cane.

"There is no time to lose!" he cried.

"You are going to the bank, I apprehend?" suggested Nick.

"At once!"

"Because you have sent 'Mr. Nicholas Carter' there?"

"Not forty minutes since."

"Alone?"

"With my brother-in-law, the cashier."

"What to do?"

"Look over things."

"This trouble you hinted at?"

"Yes."

"Forty minutes?" said Nick, musingly. "Wait—the bank number?"

"Oh! on the telephone?" queried Moss, as Nick, observing an instrument in an alcove, stepped towards it.

"Yes."

"Happy thought—we may head off the villain!"

"The imposter—we may."

Nick soon had the wires in working order.

He extended the receiver towards the banker at last.

"Connections all right," he declared.

"The bank?"

"Yes—give your orders."

"Hello! Dorsett? No! Wait—coming. Not there? Mr. Carter!"

The banker dropped the receiver till it jangled, his eyes starting.

"Too late?" inquired Nick.

"He's gone!"

"'Mr. Nicholas Carter?'"

"The scoundrel, yes!"

"Taking with him?" asked Nick.

"Nothing, of course—how could he?"

Nick looked dubious on that score.

He did not have to think long to understand the aspect of affairs.

The complication of the hour admitted of but one logical theory.

A letter intended for Nick had been misappropriated.

A message later, sent to Nick, had been fraudulently delayed.

The aim had been to get into the bank in an official way.

Nick, thoroughly understanding the average criminal, could not comprehend any motive for such a hazardous act except one that had for its end plunder.

He tried to get his companion to make a coherent statement of what had occurred, but the latter was now in a more frantic state of excitement than ever.

He dashed out into the street, and attracted a curious crowd waving his cane and shouting after a cab in the distance.

He ran so fast and far before he succeeded in securing its driver's attention that he could just voice a direction when it started up.

There was a hurried spin over the roadway—the bank was reached at fire-patrol speed.

Several clerks were working overtime in the counting room, and here a thin, precise-looking man of about fifty greeted the excited banker.

"He's gone?" cried the latter, rushing down upon his relative and cashier.

"Mr. Carter? yes," responded the other, in puzzled surprise.

"It wasn't Mr. Carter!"

"But you said it was?"

"I was fooled—duped!"

"This way, gentlemen," suggested Nick, as he noticed that the clerks had suspended their writing and were staring towards them.

"This is Mr. Carter—the real one," declared the trembling Moss.

"And this is your cashier and brother-in-law, Mr. Moss, whom you mentioned?" intimated Nick.

"Yes."

The banker led the way into his private room and sank into a chair panting and choking.

"I don't understand?" suggested the cashier.

"In a word," explained Nick, "some one has assumed my name and province."

"The man just here?"

"Yes," assented Moss.

"He was an imposter?"

"Of course!"

"But—his motive?"

"What did he do here?" demanded the banker, quickly.

"What you told him to do."

"Looked over those papers?"

The cashier bowed.

"Only that?"

"Simply that."

"He did not insist on going into the vaults?"

"Certainly not!"

"The safes?"

"They were locked and set for the night."

"True—true! But he didn't filch anything: Securities, loose cash?"

"Hardly!" negatived the cashier in a dry tone—"with none lying around loose."

"And your eye upon him," suggested Nick.

"And my eye upon him—no. He was the gentleman, the business man entire. I explained our troubles, I showed him those documents—he examined them carefully and made notes, and stated that he would think matters over and give us his opinion to-morrow morning."

"He won't do it!" observed the banker.

"I guess not," said Nick.

"And he was an imposter, you say?"

murmured the cashier, with an interested look at the detective.

Nick bowed.

The banker, relieved at finding that no apparent theft had accompanied the visit of the imposter, began to regain his composure.

"What was the fellow after, Mr. Carter?" he asked, pressingly.

"We must find out that," answered Nick.

"Of course he had a motive?"

"You can depend on that."

"I would suggest," observed the cashier, "that this was a mere initial invasion."

"You mean an opportunity to study things and later benefit by it?" questioned Nick.

"That's it!" declared Moss. "Double the watch force, Dorsett! The villain will doubtless be here before midnight with half a dozen skilled burglars!"

"Do not be alarmed on that score," said Nick, with a smile—"I will guarantee that such a plan is not in the fellow's calculation."

"What is, then?" cried the banker. "He must be daring, sleek and—informed!"

"Let me ask you a question," said Nick.

"What is that?" queried Moss.

"Your messenger, the armless man—I believe he is Mark Brewer?"

"Yes, that is his name."

"This person informed me that you sent me a letter?"

"Certainly. Did you not receive it?"

"I did not."

"It was properly addressed."

"To my residence?"

"Yes."

"And it was mailed?"

"Last evening."

"By whom?"

"It went in with the mail that is taken

to the nearest letter box every evening at five o'clock."

"Very well," said Nick, "it was intercepted."

"Not at this end of the line," insisted the banker, positively.

Nick said—nothing.

Scanning affairs by the reflected light of the queer actions of the armless man, as reported by Chick, he was disposed to figure out the letter business in a rather easy way.

"We waste time," he said, briskly. "Let me ask a few more questions. Describe to me the person who has deceived you."

Moss began, and Dorsett finished.

When they got through Nick had a very cloudy idea of what his "double" looked like.

The latter had not attempted to copy the famous expert's natural personality.

He had broken in upon the banker at precisely six o'clock armed with the information intended originally for Nick.

He had a printed card, a badge, some letters the banker had barely glanced at, bearing, he recalled, such headings as "Detective Agency," "Department of Justice," and the like.

The fraudulent Nick Carter had played the mysterious detective role.

He wore goggles, and he had a beard and wig that, put together, would have made a respectable doormat, according to the description.

"I fancied that all right," said the banker.

"Why not?" chorused the cashier. "We did not know Mr. Carter personally, and the man's methods and manner were not at all suspicious."

"Lucky nothing is gone," murmured the banker, with a sigh of relief.

"Yes—no harm done, that's sure," echoed the cashier.

"We shall see," said Nick Carter—but strictly to himself.

"Mr. Dorsett," he added, aloud, "what did you tell this man?"

"Why, I described the trouble we are having here at the bank. I suppose you want to know something about that, also?"

"All about it."

"After what has transpired, Mr. Carter," said the banker, very humbly, "I shall feel hopeless and helpless unless you consent to drag us out of our difficulties."

"We shall see," observed Nick. "What do these difficulties comprise?"

"Forgery," announced the bank president.

"Magic!" insisted his subordinate, in a snappy, positive way.

"There is something interesting on the boards here!" decided Nick Carter.

CHAPTER III.

BLANK!

"Forgery, you said?" observed Nick to the banker.

"Yes, that covers it," assented Moss.

"And—magic!" persisted the cashier.

"Let us get down to the hard, substantial facts first," suggested Nick.

"Proceed, Mr. Moss."

"I hardly know how to begin."

"You gave the details to the gentleman who so freely borrowed my name?"

"Yes."

"Then tell me what you told him."

"Well, Mr. Carter," stated the banker, "for the first time during the existence of this institution we are called upon to face irregularities."

"Serious?"

"Very serious."

"Because untraceable and mysterious," added the cashier, who was bound to have his say.

"This is what has occurred," continued Moss. "Checks have been presented——"

"How many?"

"Some twenty-five of them."

"And covering what amount?"

"Up to date, something like twelve thousand dollars. Twelve thousand dollars, of course, is a trivial amount for an institution like the Royal Trust——"

"Certainly!"

"But if the leak continues——" The banker waved his hand, suggesting sheer helplessness.

"I understand."

"These checks were presented directly over our counter in some instances."

"By parties you knew?"

"Not so."

"By strangers."

"Yes. We pay out enormous amounts of money in a day, and fully fifty per cent. of the persons who present the checks are not our customers. A large number of checks are presented calling for the ready cash. These fraudulent ones have crept in."

"But you surely insist upon the identification of the strangers?"

"Or an 'O. K.'"

"I see. Go on."

"The checks were payable to 'John Adams,' to 'B. B. Rice,' to 'Seth W. Polk,' to various common names in the directory. Sometimes a storekeeper customer, who had taken one in the course of business, would bring it in—sometimes the payee would ask for a certification, and, later, it would come to us through the Clearing House."

"By whom were the checks drawn?" asked Nick.

"Ostensibly by our very oldest customers and largest depositors."

"By any special ones?"

"No—one day it would be a firm on the Stock Exchange; the next a manufacturing company."

"The checks seemed all straight and regular?"

"There is where we are baffled."

"The signatures?"

"Positively cannot be distinguished from the genuine."

"But the numbers?"

"So correct, so near to that of the last paid check on file—never duplicating one already in—that there is not a safeguard we could think of to arm ourselves against these forgeries."

"You then mean," said Nick, "that a check coming into this establishment—not from one, but from twenty different persons—in each instance is practically as perfect as to number, perforation, signature and 'O. K.' as if in every respect legitimate?"

"Positively. Why, Mr. Carter, in four instances, where a private maker is used—and, mind you, changed with certain regular dates in the month—there was not a flaw in the check."

"You surprise me," said Nick.

"It has been with a good deal of trouble that we have sorted out the real from the spurious," proceeded the banker. "These latter we have grouped together. I sent my brother-in-law to-night to show these to the supposed Mr. Carter—the imposter. They are yonder."

The speaker reached over for a package compressed within two individual paste-board covers.

Between these, held by elastic bands, were a number of checks.

Nick took them as they were tendered.

"These are the forgeries?" he inquired.

"Up to date," said the banker.

Nick did not examine them at once.

He saw that the banker's lips were moving, as with the advance influence of something exciting that he had to add to that already revealed.

Nick looked up at him quickly, saying:

"That is all?"

"No!" negatived the banker, with emphasis.

"No," added the cashier—"and here is where the magic comes in."

"Truly, it seems so, Mr. Carter," ob-

served Moss, very seriously. "I wish you to examine an order that you will find among the checks in that package."

"An order? From whom?"

"Myself. Tuesday morning a bill was brought here, addressed to me; in an envelope. The cashier took it from the person presenting it, told him to call later, and placed it in my letter tray. It was for services rendered."

"In what line?"

"For roofing on some buildings we hold in trust. The amount was thirteen dollars and fifty cents. I remembered the contract, but not the contractor. I placed the bill aside till I could verify it; yet less than two hours later, Mr. Dorsett here insists it came to him, with other orders and papers, marked on the back, as you will see, 'Pay thirteen hundred and fifty dollars, as per above.'"

"Thirteen hundred and fifty dollars?"

"Yes."

"And the bill?"

"Was changed on its face from thirteen dollars and fifty cents to the larger amount."

"You had not written the indorsement?"

"Never!"

"Nor signed your name?"

"Assuredly no."

"You are sure the original amount was only thirteen dollars and fifty cents?"

"I would swear to it!"

"And the person presenting it?"

"Did not at all represent the firm, as we later learned."

"How did he know that such an amount was due them?"

"I cannot tell you."

"You paid out the thirteen hundred and fifty dollars."

"Mr. Moss' order is never questioned here," observed the cashier, sagely.

Nick did not speak for a moment or two.

He was neither troubled nor baffled,

but he wished to get the developments correctly grouped, accurately analyzed.

"How soon after the bill was first observed by you was the same returned to the cashier in your tray?" he inquired next.

"It was handed in at ten—it was paid at eleven-thirty," responded the banker.

"You mean to tell me, then," asked Nick, "that some one changed the amount in the bill, wrote your indorsement, and placed the bill in the cash tray, during that hour and a half?"

"Yes."

"Who was in your private office during that time?"

"Not a soul except myself."

"You are positive of that?"

"I was engrossed in some particular business concerning the floating of a new enterprise, and gave it out that I was not to be interrupted. At ten the boy brought in the tray. I attended to what it held—but not to that bill. At eleven-thirty I rang for him, gave him the tray, and left the bank. The original presenter of the bill appeared a few minutes later."

Nick regarded the banker searchingly.

"There is a flaw here, somewhere," he observed.

"I can't explain it!" said the banker, desperately.

"Magic, I tell you!" declared the cashier.

"Of course you do not mean that seriously?" observed Nick.

"Why, no—still, construe the matter, if you can?"

"This far," responded Nick, "it is apparent that whoever uttered those checks is an expert forger."

"I never heard of anything approximating the faultless work done," said the banker.

"Of course some one altered that bill," proceeded Nick. "Now then—the boy who handles the tray——"

The cashier flushed with quick resentment.

"Sir!" he said, "he is my youngest son."

"Beg pardon," observed Nick, "but—you vouch for him?"

"Why! he can only crudely copy a line from a writing book."

"He comes from the president's office direct to you, without stopping?"

"Always—the eyes of the entire bank are upon him."

Nick took up the package of "proofs" in the case.

"Examine them, Mr. Carter," suggested the banker.

"Yes, at once."

"They tell me that detective science has done some marvelous things in the way of tracing down a case from its chir-ography aspect?"

"That is true. Ah, by the way," observed Nick, deferring his examination of the checks, and in quite an ordinary tone—"your messenger to me——"

"Mark Brewer?"

"The same."

"The armless man."

"Yes—I wondered a good deal what possible use you could put a person like that to in an institution of this sort."

"Why, not much," admitted the banker. "He is a poor unfortunate whom we felt it our duty to pension off."

"An old employee of the bank, then?"

"Oh, no—he has been here barely six months."

"Ah!"

"He lost his arms in our service, you see."

"In your service?"

"We may put it that way. The bank advanced quite an amount some years since on a mortgage on a large Dakota farm. There was litigation, and we placed the matter in the hands of a lawyer out in Huron, and beat the owners of the farm. This Brewer held possession for us in a rather plucky way. He fell under a reaper the next year, and had both of his arms clipped off at the shoulders."

"Unfortunate, truly!" commented Nick.

"The lawyer apprized us of the accident, and when the farm was sold we

sent Brewer a check for a hundred dollars to help him along."

"But he came East?"

"Unexpectedly. He begged of me to fit him in where he could think he was working and earning a living, and we have made a general utility man of him."

"But what does he do?"

"Keeps the run of the office, and delivers verbal messages inside and outside."

"I understand," said Nick, storing the information.

"He can't steal, you see," half chucked the cashier.

"So, the piles of gold and bills have no temptations for him," added the banker. "But Brewer is a thoroughly honest and reliable fellow, and I sent him to you because he knew something about the forgeries."

"How is that?"

"He accidentally overheard us discuss it, and honorably apprized us of the fact."

"Indeed!" said Nick. "These are the checks, are they?" he interrogated, unstrapping the package he had taken up.

"Yes, Mr. Carter," assented the banker—"there are your clues. We are now very closely scanning all the checks that come in. For several days I do not think we have been hit."

"Perhaps the forger has played his game out?" suggested the cashier.

"Whether or not," observed the banker, "he must be run down if possible."

"Ah, right," said Nick, opening the parcel. "These are as originally received, Mr. Moss?"

"Certainly."

Nick Carter fixed a scrutinizing look on the first, the second, the third, the fourth, and so on to the last one of the checks in the parcel.

Back and front he studied them—back and front he also examined the bill and the order to which the banker had alluded.

Then he arose to his feet, a singular expression upon his face.

"You showed these to the man who assumed my identity here to-night?" Nick questioned the cashier.

"Under a mistaken idea—yes," assented Dorsett.

"He went over these documents?"

"All of them."

"Before your sight here?"

"Practically. I gave him that little table and the shaded lamp."

"Why?"

"He said he wanted to examine the checks leisurely, and also to take notes."

"He scrutinized them closely?"

"Very—I noticed that. He had an instrument he placed over them, a new magnifying glass he said it was, and——"

"Gentlemen," interrupted Nick, tossing the package upon the table as if it were so much waste paper, "we have discovered what the impostor came for."

"How!" exclaimed the banker, impressed by Nick's tone.

"He got what he wanted."

"What do you mean?"

"Those checks, that order——"

"Well, sir?"

"They are blank!"

CHAPTER IV.

AN ARTISTIC SWINDLE.

"Blank!" exclaimed the banker, springing electrically to his feet.

"What do you mean by that, Mr. Carter?" cried the cashier.

"Look for yourself," said Nick.

"Why!"

With hurried fingers, the cashier took up the package of documents.

They fell free from his grasp, spreading out so that a glance could take in at least a part of all the checks revealed.

These showed not one single mark in ink.

Front, back, whatever writing the checks had borne originally, all this was now obliterated.

Except where there had been perforation, the checks were the same as though just removed from a book and never used.

The cashier was thrown completely off his balance.

He again ran through the heap, held them up to the light, felt them, and then stared vacantly at the detective.

Moss was stupefied by the discovery of the moment.

"You said magic," he voiced, quite feebly; "yes, it is magic, indeed!"

"Hardly," observed Nick.

"The impostor——" began Moss.

"Got what he came for, as I said."

"His intention——"

"Was to find out, firstly, how far you had got onto his system."

"Which we babbled like greenhorns—like children!" groaned the banker.

"Next, he sought and secured the opportunity to destroy every evidence of forgery in your possession."

"Why, it is incredible!" gasped Moss.

"He did it, nevertheless," observed Nick, coolly, with a sweep of his hand across the checks.

"But how?" demanded the cashier.

"Before your very eyes, did he not?"

"Why——"

"You were noticing him."

"But—could I suspect!"

"No, you could not—frankly. That 'magnifying glass' of his was quite a deceptive move—while entirely natural, under the circumstances."

"Then it was not a magnifying glass?"

"Certainly not."

"And mark you, Mr. Carter," said the bank president, who had summoned sufficient steadiness to carefully inspect one of the checks, "this process, the ability to destroy a signature, a document, with one wave of the hand—why, such a power could disintegrate the banking business of the world!"

"There is no erasive agent known to me that could in a week's time effect the work done there," declared the cashier.

"How was it done?" inquired the banker.

Nick took a check, went up to the light, and examined the document with the aid of his own powerful magnifying glass.

"Pressure," he reported, first.

"Indeed!" murmured the cashier.

"A special ink, I imagine, also."

"It must be so."

"Electricity," added Nick, finally.

The cashier stared.

"Yes," asserted the detective, with positiveness, "your visitor had in small compass secreted somewhere about him a machine and a battery. There has been zinc absorption here. He applied a roller, turned on a current—the result——"

"Blank!"

"Exactly—the man is something more than a forger; he is a scientist."

The banker struggled with the disturb-

ing ideas suggested by the discovery of the moment.

"It must have been quick work," he remarked.

"Quick and thorough," assented Nick. "You observe where the check was filled in?"

"Where there has been an obliteration?"

"Yes. There you find a smooth, definite mark like that of a hot flat iron edge."

"I notice."

"The man simply passed a small cylinder over the paper. This he could do very rapidly. I am sorry it has happened. With the checks as they were, the handwriting would have been a certain guide, the indorsements another. We could have traced down individual checks."

"Now?"

"Now it is starting from the ground up."

"On theory."

"Let us begin to build," said Nick. "The paying-teller does not remember the face of any one of the persons who passed the forged checks?"

"No," answered the cashier, "I questioned him regarding that."

"The man who presented the raised bill? Mr. Dorsett," proceeded Nick, "you dealt with him. What kind of a looking person was he?"

The cashier shook his head.

"Mr. Carter," he said, "I deal with from two to three hundred different people daily. With those I do not know the protection of a system hitherto invulnerable has made me indifferent."

"You could not describe this man?"

"Not satisfactorily."

"Then we will look inside the bank," said Nick.

"How is that?" demanded the banker, sharply.

"Inside the bank?" repeated the cashier.

"Certainly."

"You think——"

"I know that here is the starting point of the fraud."

"Inside of the bank!" repeated Moss, staring.

"Yes. Let me present a few points to your notice. Some one intercepted the letter meant for me."

"It seems so."

"Some one was apprized of your discoveries, of your intentions. We go back further: It is no novelty for even a bungler with time and patience to perfect himself in copying a single signature—but twenty! thirty!"

"He must be a genius!"

"Rather, he must have unusual and admirable facilities for getting the preparatory material for his enterprise."

"The material?"

"Yes, access to the signatures of the ostensible makers of the checks. This person, besides, is provided with an accurate knowledge of the number series, the private marks. Your entire banking system. It is simple."

"You have formed an opinion?"

"Decidedly. It is that the forger—or his accomplice—has access to the bank signature book, to every department and every detail of your business."

This startling declaration was received in silence. The banker looked fixedly at the detective; the cashier copied his manner.

They had sent for "the doctor;" here he was, and he had "diagnosed" the case!

"Could there be any other way?" suggested Nick.

"I had scarcely entertained the idea——" began the banker, musingly.

"You are naturally averse to considering that phase, of course," said Nick.

"So would you be, if you knew our force," said the cashier. "It comprises old, staid, reliable persons."

"I would vouch for every one of them!" declared Moss, with energy.

Nick sat silent for the space of over a minute.

His companions fixed anxious, suspenseful eyes upon him; his grim inscrutability puzzled them.

As he looked up, it was the sign for the banker to say something.

"Mr. Carter," he observed, "you can realize that we have been the victims of no ordinary fraud."

"On the contrary—decidedly new, audacious and artistic."

"You can further see that at no future time, with the knowledge and the rare gifts the swindler evidently possesses, are we safe from a wholesome raid?"

"I see that—yes."

"This forger must be run down!"

"Very well—I undertake the commission."

"You hope, then——" began Moss, eagerly.

"I began with work," declared Nick, sententiously.

"Of course."

"Hope and the rest trail on later."

"Ah!"

"Let me have now an accurate list, a perfect description, of every person employed in this establishment or living in the building."

"We occupy the entire building."

"That simplifies the matter; but your official roster, so to speak?"

It was seemingly an arduous task that Nick had suggested.

With any other person it might have consumed hours. Yet rapidly, though patiently, he went over a book containing the names and the record of the various attaches of the bank, inside of twenty minutes.

Nick put direct inquiries and received concise answers.

From the janitor who lived in the garret, to the watchman who had a room in the basement, he went through the histories of office boy, messenger, cashier, tellers, clerks.

Nick arose slowly and drew on his gloves, first folding and placing in his pocket one of the obliterated checks.

"What next?" queried the banker, rather anxiously.

"Yes—when shall we hear from you again?" pressed the cashier.

"I will report to-morrow morning," answered Nick. "Meantime, you will help me out to the extent of circulating the announcement that a clever fraud has been played on the bank, that the forger has scooped in his plunder, obliterated his trail, disappeared, and, for once, defied the best detective skill."

"This is to be given out in the bank?" inquired Moss, significantly.

"Yes."

"Not outside?"

"No need—it will answer my purpose to have that report go only among the banking force."

"Your purpose, Mr. Carter?" interrogated the banker.

"Yes, what is your purpose, may I ask?" inquired the cashier.

"You may—to-morrow."

CHAPTER V.

THE ALPHABET BLOCKS.

The banker had not particularly noticed it, but Nick Carter had turned him inside out on one theme.

This comprised the details concerning "the armless man."

Adroitly bringing up this curious attache of the institution here and there, quite casually referring to him all along the interview, Nick had found out exactly what he wanted to know.

With his antecedents, his place of residence, his habits, his misfortune, he was posted completely as he left the shadow of the Royal Trust building.

The detective looked over the bank edifice from cellar to cornice.

He took in the details of surroundings and structures, and opposite elevation with the critical air of a surveyor or an architect.

Then he went straight to Broadway, and after a few minutes entered a branch office of the Western Union Telegraph service.

The Dakota tariff of rates was what interested the detective—particularly the cost of telegraphing to Huron.

Nick consulted a little book, which he carried always in a very private pocket.

There was at Huron, he found, one of those persons whose addresses he had in every large city and town in the country, whose affiliation with his own professional line constituted them useful and trustworthy aids when occasion required.

Over the wires, an hour later, flashed quite a lengthy message.

Nick went home after this; a reply was not due until the next day.

Chick was awaiting him with some eagerness.

The detective's ambitious assistant presented the appearance of a person having something to communicate, but his first eagerness was to learn from the lips of his chief the result of his visit to the bank.

Chick wonderingly regarded the sample check which Nick passed to him,

while he was reciting the main points of the enterprise of the evening.

"Twelve thousand dollars!" murmured Chick, thoughtfully, "and—decidedly slick!"

"It's a new deal, Chick, in a way," assented the detective. "When we run down this crowd, we will either find some old hands at the front, with the latest and best, or a brilliant new lot who have reduced bank working to a very fine science."

"Of course there is an insider."

"Can you doubt it?"

"Then there will be some inside work on the case?"

"Certainly—we must make our start there. I have the personnel of the working force, and the routine and environment of the institution in general."

"First, then, to dispose of the employees?"

"Let Patsy and Ida help on that score. I will arrange in detail to-morrow."

Nick rapidly outlined his instructions.

It could be arranged to have Chick spend a few hours behind the counters as "a representative of the bank examiner."

Ida, in widow's weeds, could present a note, necessitating her waiting in the bank for a supposed party who was to indorse for her.

There was an old barrel organ in Nick's dressing room that had done service on more than one occasion.

Patsy should resurrect it, and, taking up a position near the bank, could scan from a different point of view those entering and leaving the institution.

"I noticed that the clerks in the front office seemed somewhat excited by curiosity during your interview with the banker and the cashier," observed Chick.

"Ah! you noticed that, did you?" said Nick, with a keen stare.

"Yes."

"Then you were on the scene?"

"About eight o'clock. A mere accident."

"Explain, Chick?"

"That armless man left here before you did."

"I am aware of it."

"The thought possessed me to stroll after him, when you had left."

"You ran across him?"

"By sheer luck—for he was gone quite a little time."

"But you caught up with him."

"I did."

"Where?"

"About five squares from here. He was looking in the windows of the stores. When he stopped before that of a stationery establishment, I became interested."

"Go on, Chick."

"Positively devoured with curiosity when he went inside!"

"What did he buy?"

"I duplicated his purchase."

"Indeed?"

"You shall see."

Chick reached for a square package done up neatly in wrapping paper, and tore off the covering.

"Alphabet blocks," said Nick, removing the highly-colored cover of the box.

"The armless man purchased the exact duplicate of that set," asserted Chick.

"And carried it away with him?"

"Yes."

"How was that?"

"He wears a coat that has all kinds of convenient pockets. The storekeeper had to pick out his change from one of these, stow the box into another, open the door for his customer and all that; but the man lost no time in the transaction."

"Brewer then proceeded home?"

"Yes."

"To the bank?"

"He rooms, I fancy, in the building."

"That is right."

"He let himself in at all events, with a key."

"With a key?"

"It seemed so. At any rate, the door was locked. Where he fished the key from I could not see at a distance."

"And how did he manipulate it?"

"Well, he did. His head, body, knees, seemed to assist in the unique operation, but he had that door open quickly, and removed the key with his lips——"

"Ah! with his lips!"

"He went in—disappeared."

Nick moved over the alphabet blocks thoughtfully, taking in all that Chick reported.

At nine o'clock the next morning he held a brief but animated interview with Chick, Patsy and Ida.

The latter took a note to a high gov-

ernment official prominent in Treasury circles.

Patsy disappeared, to reappear the typical organ grinder in garb and intentions.

The most charming little widow in the world, Ida demurely made a second appearance, and started out on her mission with an approving compliment from Nick.

The secret service expert had lost no time in getting in play the initiatory movements of his system.

The machinery in motion was bound to develop some kind of results before the day was done, but he did not wait idly for nightfall.

Nick had adopted a disguise penetrable only by his assistants, because he had advised them of his intention to assume it.

He looked up the local record of the armless man that morning.

It was with logical persistency that Nick confined his efforts to investigations more or less circling about this individual.

At noon Ida met her superior at a restaurant agreed on.

She had nothing particular to report, she claimed, although she was able to portray a vivid photograph of every suspicious or shady person who had entered the bank that morning.

"You may as well keep up the shadow till towards three o'clock," directed Nick.

"Very well," assented the little lady detective.

"Even if you do not find out anything."

"But I shall find out something!"

"You think that?"

"I am very sure of it."

"You have something in view now, Ida," observed Nick, shrewdly regarding his companion's face.

"Why, of course!" smiled Nick's pretty assistant.

There was an open window just beside the table at which the colloquy was taking place.

There, suddenly appeared Patsy.

He nodded to Nick, and he smiled mysteriously at Ida.

"Right!" he observed to the latter.

"What is this?" rallied Nick—"a secret!"

"An experiment," said Ida.

"Concerning——"

"The bank, of course," began Patsy.

"And your armless man," interrupted Ida. "The truth is, that he sent a message this morning."

"Oh! you know that?" questioned Nick.

"Patsy seems to."

"And he is probably expecting a reply," added the latter.

"For which we shall keep a sharp lookout," observed Ida.

"Explain," directed Nick.

"You asked me to watch this Brewer particularly," said Ida.

"Yes."

"He went up stairs to his quarters, I suppose—about eleven o'clock."

"Of which fact she apprized me through finger telegraphy," explained Patsy. "I watched out."

"To what purpose?"

"I saw the armless man at a window five minutes later, and I noticed some pretty lively maneuvers—for a cripple."

"What were they?"

"He set on the top of the lower sash, tilted against the glass——"

"Some alphabet blocks!" instantly surmised Nick.

"Ah! you know?"

"No, I anticipated from what I knew before of those same alphabet blocks."

"I see. Very well, he placed a line quick as a fellow setting type."

"With his mouth?"

"That was it—one by one he picked out the blocks with his lips, one by one he ranged them along."

"Till they read?"

"'Nick Carter in touch.'"

"'Nick Carter in touch,' eh?" murmured the detective, musingly.

"That was the first line."

"There was a second?"

"Yes."

"What was that one?"

"'Send instructions.'"

Nick nodded with a good deal of satisfaction.

"He left the blocks in place—how long?" he inquired.

"Not sixty seconds."

"Some one was posted opposite them, waiting for that message?"

"Not a soul."

"Sure of that, Patsy."

"Dead certain. There is nothing directly opposite but that high fence that they use for a mammoth billboard."

"I know."

"And no one passes on the temporary sidewalk there unless he has to."

"I noticed that, also."

"No one was passing or hanging around when those blocks were set."

"The cripple looked from the window?"

"Yes."

"In what direction?"

"Exactly opposite."

"You are sure of that?"

"And rapidly removed the blocks."

"Nothing since, Patsy?"

"Not a move."

"No, we are just watching," added Ida.

"Keep watching," directed Nick.

He left his two young assistants to themselves, for Chick had passed the front of the restaurant at that moment.

Nick strolled out and joined him around the corner.

"At sea," instantly reported Chick.

"You cannot find any suspicious parties in the bank?"

"Not as yet," answered Chick.

"Not even the armless man?"

"He seems out of the question."

"Why so?"

"Helpless!"

Nick smiled shrewdly.

"Perhaps you will not say so when I show you something, Chick," he observed.

"Perhaps not—usually I change my ideas when you hint in that mysterious tone!"

"Not mysterious—but significant."

"Enlighten—won't you?"

"Well, there is a telegram—from Dakota."

"Ah!"

"From Huron, in fact."

"In reply to the one you sent last night?"

"Exactly."

"What does it say?"

"Read for yourself."

Nick tendered an envelope, and Chick expectantly drew out its enclosure.

CHAPTER VI.

THE LITTLE LADY DETECTIVE.

Chick gave a start as he perused the few words the telegram contained. It read thus:

"Mark Brewer has been dead and buried for nearly a year."

"Our Mark Brewer?" inquired Chick.

"Of course," nodded Nick.

"Armless—and all that?"

"Yes."

"Precisely like the cripple at the bank?"

"I sent definite instructions to a trusty party to investigate," explained Nick, "and this is the reply."

"Which means that the fellow posing as Mark Brewer has taken a dead man's place."

"He is an impostor, yes. He struck me as the head of this affair from the start," said Nick; "he so strikes me now, still more formidably."

"You don't say how?"

"Not until I am sure of a certain line of reasoning I am following out."

"We have arrived at a positive clew, at all events."

"Yes—Brewer is the man to watch."

"Will that be difficult?"

"I think it will, judging from what Patsy and Ida have just told me."

"What is that?"

Nick recapitulated; Chick was immensely interested.

"Brewer bought those alphabet blocks for no educational purpose, it seems," he remarked.

"Scarcely—and his use of them implies a plan to exercise extreme caution in communicating with his accomplices."

"Till the hue and cry is over."

"Gather what you can, Chick, up to three o'clock. Then we will compare notes."

Nick proceeded on his way.

He acted the part of the general overseer of a tactical situation for the ensuing two hours.

The detective now studied the bank building and its surroundings more closely than before.

The bank's upper window—which, doubtless, was that of the room in which

Brewer was domiciled—was the centre of a close inspection on Nick's part.

Opposite, there was nothing but the billboard fence.

It ran very high, and it came up tight to the sides of two buildings a hundred feet apart.

Its centre seemed the natural spot at which a person would post himself to view clearly distant objects, like the alphabet blocks.

Still, Patsy had affirmed that no one had been so posted, and the buildings at the rear of the vacant space that the billboard shut in were about one hundred and fifty feet distant, and had a blank, windowless back wall.

It was nearly three o'clock when Nick, lingering in this vicinity, abruptly directed his attention to Patsy.

The latter had dropped the droning tune he had been grinding out all the afternoon.

Suddenly and rollickingly he started up a waltz on double-quick time.

Nick divined that there was some significance to this.

It was a signal to Ida, the detective considered, scanning the front of the bank closely.

Through a window he could see Ida's black bonnet and veil.

Standing at a radiator, almost at her side, was the armless man.

He was looking out of a window, watching the street scrutinizingly.

Brisk clerks and important business men were going into and coming from the bank all of the time.

Nick scanned those entering. It was difficult to pick out the one Patsy had apparently spotted.

A fruit girl with a basket on her arm passed up the steps.

The cripple continued his pose at the window, and Ida did not appear to move.

Nick fancied it best not to disturb the situation; he walked around the block.

His intention was to get near enough to Patsy, without appearing conspicuous, to receive a hint of what was going on.

Nick was somewhat surprised, as he reached the corner again, to find his assistant had departed.

The bank closed its doors; Ida did not come out.

A hand pressed Nick's arm and urged him from his attitude of inspection.

"Waiting for you," apprized Chick.

"Ida and Patsy?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

Chick led the way two blocks, turning into a court and thence into an old vacant building.

Patsy greeted him with effusion; Ida looked modestly gratified.

"I see you have something to tell," observed Nick.

"Just this," said Patsy—"that I kept my eyes out sharply for the reply to that alphabet block message."

"Did that jump to a fast, lively tune on the hand organ proclaim it, Patsy?" questioned Nick.

"It did."

"What started the inspiration?"

"A fruit girl."

"Ah! I saw her."

"She passed the bank twice, looked up at the windows, and, I could have sworn, smiled at the armless man."

"And entered?"

"Not just then. She went around the corner first."

"What to do?"

"Look over her wares."

"Apples and such."

"Particularly apples! She took one out from away under the heap—a bright, red beauty—and unscrewed it."

"A dummy?"

"Papier mache, of course. She looked into it, restored it to its natural appearance, and this time went into the bank. I did some finger work towards Ida—who came to the window when I set up that lively tune."

"The girl went selling her wares in the bank, I suppose?" surmised Nick.

"She made a play at it—yes," answered Ida, taking up the thread of the narrative.

"What kind of a play?"

"To cover her real intention: She worked around to me, gave me a keen look, and sold me a couple of apples."

"You were watching for the dummy one?"

"Patsy's code was clear—yes. She hailed the cripple. He passed some ordinary badinage with her."

"And purchased?"

"He told her to fish in one pocket for the nickel, and put in another the two apples he had purchased."

"Which she did?"

"Depositing with the other the apple she had retained in her hand ever since coming into the bank."

"Did you get that apple, Ida?"

"Before she had ceased conversing with this Brewer. His back was to me, and I had excellent opportunity, and his form sheltered me from her view. Under my heavy veil, I found an opportunity to examine the apple. I replaced it in the course of five minutes."

"But lost the girl?"

"Oh! I should know her again."

"And now, then—as to this apple?"

"It contained a card bent around its hollow interior. The card bore these words: 'Don't stir. Drop everything. Wait for the wires.'"

"That was all?"

"It's something?"

"Oh, yes—indeed!"

"It sends this Brewer back into his hole clear out of sight for a spell, I trace it," declared Chick.

"About that," nodded Nick, thoughtfully. "You will hunt up this fruit girl, if possible, Ida."

"I shall."

"I will advise with you later in the evening," said the detective to Patsy.

To Chick he made a slight inclination of his head.

They left the place together. Nick's manner indicated that he had some directions to impart.

"What next?" asked his assistant.

"I will have to see the bank president and his cashier, as I agreed," said Nick.

"And in the meantime—myself?"

"Why, I will tell you, Chick," said the detective. "I would like to find out how Brewer sends his alphabet messages so quickly to their destination."

"Good!" assured Chick, with briskness—"let it be my part to find that out for you."

CHAPTER VII.

A SHOOT THROUGH SPACE.

"Come off that ladder!"

"One minute, my friend!"

It was Chick who spoke last.

He would scarcely have been recognized by his closest acquaintance.

The detective's assistant presented nothing of his real personality. So he had been safe and free to prowls about the neighborhood of the bank for hours after that institution had closed its doors.

Chick occupied a somewhat prominent position.

He was climbing up a light but strong bill poster's ladder.

A fine job of plastering the immense surface with fresh theatre bills had just been executed.

The front glistened with trickling paste, and high colors came forth lurid from under this slimy veil.

Chick had watched the upper part of the bank ever since dusk.

The armless man had gone to his quarters. No light showed there, but the window was open, and Chick was certain that he was still its occupant.

Chick had kept his eye on all passers-by on the opposite side of the street.

No person acting suspiciously or the least bit interested in that upper bank room, had passed along, however.

For fully an hour four bill posters had been covering the great billboard.

They had concluded their task, and most of their truck had been deposited in their waiting wagon; when some friend of the craft chanced along.

He had invited the quartette to drink with him; all hands had departed for the nearest saloon.

Chick had immediately crossed the street.

He had figured out quite an idea while watching the bill posters at work.

One of the ladders had been left in place.

It occurred to Chick that a glance over the top of the billboard might be in line with some vague suggestion his mind had received during the past hour.

Chick ascended the ladder. He was half way up it when the challenge came from below.

In Chick a returning billposter saw only some person immensely audacious, or bent on mischief.

"Come down, I say!" he ordered, gruffly.

"Can't you wait a minute, I say?" retorted Chick.

"You won't?"

"Not till I reach the top."

"You'll never reach the top of this ladder!"

"But I will!" disputed Chick.

"Then you'll stay there."

"Perhaps."

"Hah!"

Chick had hurried his nimble feet and hands.

Two feet from the rail topping the billboard, he was borne off his balance.

The skilled billposter knew how to ably handle one of the principal implements of his trade.

He not only gave the ladder a pull, but, seizing its bottom rung, he executed a twist, the suddenness of which was bewildering.

Chick turned over, lost his grip, and was flung outward.

He resented most of all this failure to accomplish his purpose.

A slam against the board surface, a drop of a few yards, was merely trivial, under the circumstances.

"Go it!" jeered the billposter.

"The deuce!" muttered Chick.

"Hello!" yawned the man below, aghast.

Chick had disappeared.

He had disappeared with a sharp sound like the snapping of thin ice.

Where he struck there came a gaping rent in paper made thick and tough through the hardening of many layers.

But for the softening influence of the layer just put on, it is doubtful if even the force with which he was headed would have carried him through this paper wall.

He slid and burst through a space that, it seemed, had no backing.

Chick grazed something—he knew not what, with the swiftmess of his forward and then sheer downward progress.

He struck out both arms, and they met a scantling that supported the billboard.

He slid down this to the ground, got his breath and poise, and glanced about him.

It was a disordered, irregular lot that the shut in space comprised.

To the rear and at one side were the blank walls of buildings. To his right, however, so far as he could make it out, more irregular structures hedged in the lot.

Chick heard voices beyond the billboard, and this structure creaked as a pressure was brought to bear upon it.

The man who had pulled the ladder had, it seemed, been joined by his fellows.

Their voices could be heard—then at the gap a human head came through.

"Hi, there!" hailed its owner.

Chick did not reply.

"Stay there!" growled the same person—"find your way out, if you won't be civilized—after breaking the law!"

There came a clapping sound a moment later.

The jagged ends of the aperture were pressed back as a new sheet of paper was set in place, to restore the outward symmetry and finish of the billboard.

Chick had not responded to the hail, for two reasons.

In the first place he did not care to have anything further to do with the billposters.

In the next, he fancied he had made a discovery along the line of some recent pertinent mental suggestions.

Looking up at the now covered gap, Chick discerned why there had been no backing at that particular spot.

A section of the boards about three feet square was missing.

They had been sawed out, and the pieces lay almost at his feet.

Their ends showed a fresh cut—in fact, near them lay quite a sprinkle of sawdust.

This was not all. Nailed to cleats running from the centre of the billboard to its extreme ends, about five feet below the top rail, was a single board.

It was frail and weakly stanchioned, but Chick in a minute decided that it had been used for platform purposes.

The detective's assistant started to move towards the end of this curious aerial pathway.

He could trace no practical purpose of utility in the board aloft.

It ended at a point where the billboard squarely faced the bank building.

"Struck it!" muttered Chick, with sudden unction.

What Nick Carter's quick-witted associate determined on was this:

Those alphabet block messages—and all other signals and messages, perchance

—were directed at some person who, at stated intervals, or with some means of announcing his lurking proximity, was stationed at the point where the boards had been sawed away.

A mere tiny knife prick through the covering paper would afford a loophole to which the naked eye or a spy glass could be applied.

Just then a bell somewhere in the near vicinity pealed out the full hour.

On the first stroke a sharp, hard sound at the end of the billboard attracted Chick's attention.

The detective's assistant strained his vision.

He made out a movement—traced it.

Then Chick shrank to the ground, lying perfectly flat and still.

For there seemed to appear a positive verification as to his theory concerning the utility of the mysterious plankway behind the billboard.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE ELECTRIC BARRIER.

Chick "lay low"—he was well under the shadows grouping about the inside base of the billboard.

He fixed his eyes towards the end of that structure.

The sound he had heard there was caused by the drooping, the "unwinding," of a detached stairway.

This one was of iron—such as are used at some theatre for exits in cases of fire.

The same are also occasionally employed for a blind exit from "crooked" gambling dens, and panel houses.

Operated from an isolated rear porch scuttle, the ladder hugged the building closely.

It swung down its side—elongating, unfolding, in fact.

Its end rested just where the single plank came five feet beneath the top of the billboard and ran along it.

Of course, human agency alone could be acting upon the ladder.

Its stopping at the plank described was significant.

Chick strained his vision, and discerned a human figure descending the iron ladder.

This person reached the billboard

plank, and lightly and with an air of ease, as though used to its regular employment, stepped briskly along it.

The man did precisely what Chick counted on his doing.

He paused where the gap had been mended.

He acted a little bewildered, or annoyed—Chick could not tell which.

Taking out a knife, he began to make an incision through the paper just set in place.

Then he stood motionless, his eye glued to a new loophole of observation.

Chick ventured to cautiously crawl directly up to the inside surface of the billboard.

The plank aloft would shut him out from view should the man poised there chance to glance down.

Some glints of light coming from the street through cracks at the extreme lower edge of the billboard had attracted Chick.

Lying flat, he essayed through one of these to get a view of the bank front.

Chick labored under disadvantage, but he became satisfied of one fact:

There was a light in the room occupied by the armless man.

It gave out some curious flickers—intelligible signals, probably to the man overhead, who could scan the prospect more perfectly and understandingly than Chick.

Then the light went out; the board creaked, the man moved along it.

Chick dropped flat again.

He watched the man reach the end of the platform.

He ran up the ladder; the creak of a windlass sounded.

Chick had not seen the face of the man—it was too dark, and, besides that, he was too far away.

He had disappeared through the hole in the porch, and was manipulating the ladder now.

This was done, Chick calculated from the slowness with which the ladder moved, by one of those triple-lever contrivances that a child could work, but no one could operate rapidly.

The detective's assistant realized the importance of promptly following up this first clew to an outsider connected with the bank forgeries.

Chick glided across the lot, seized a brace, and climbed to the platform board.

The ladder end had been raised some five feet from it—in fact, had shortened that length.

Chick put out his hand and seized its lowermost iron rung.

His feet came free. Chick was lifted with the rising ladder.

The device was rigid. It slowly crept up the side of the building, and paused about two yards under the trap in the porch.

Click!

"The gearing is fast," traced Chick.

Slam!

"The top is closed, and I am shut out," soliloquized the suspended adventurer.

Chick listened for a moment or two.

He heard footsteps cross the porch flooring.

A key moved in a lock; a door opened, and closed.

Chick went up the ladder till his shoulders touched the trapdoor.

The ladder top was hinged to the brick wall just under it.

Through a hole in the porch floor ran two chains to the lever mechanism above.

Chick could not budge the trap; but he could hear a loose bolt clink as he pressed strongly against the trapdoor.

He located this, inserted his hand past the chain, and after some little groping about managed to draw the bolt.

Chick presently found himself on a porch upon one side of which was a door.

It was through this that the man had just disappeared.

Chick turned the knob with caution. Then he delved into an inside pocket.

A tool he always carried with him for just such exigencies did the work anticipated.

He slipped the lock tumblers, opened the door, closed it softly, stood still and listened.

He could not see, and he dared not venture to strike a match.

There sounded along the apparent corridor that he was in the jarring hum of some distant machinery.

No other sound came to his ears.

Chick groped his way ahead.

He was surprised at the distance he

covered with no door or other apertures presenting.

Twice the four-feet wide corridor turned; in fact, it seemed as though he were penetrating new corridors made continuous by cutting through intervening walls.

At several places stout planks covered what had once been windows or doorways.

Chick kept on.

"It's bound to end somewhere!" he told himself confidently.

The man he was after could have progressed in no other direction, so Chick felt that he was on the right trail up to date, and that satisfied him for the time being.

Abruptly the corridor turned, abruptly it ended.

Chick stumbled over a heterogeneous mass of stuff.

It seemed to comprise wood, glass, iron and wire.

He felt among it, and somehow connected the hovering jar of machinery with things electrical.

Half the passage width was clear; Chick groped a few feet farther on.

"All right!" he muttered, "a door! Yes, and unlocked," he added.

What it might lead to he could not divine, he had to risk something.

Chick turned the knob and cautiously pulled the door slightly ajar.

After a pause, his ears strained to catch the slightest sound, he opened the door wider, and stared.

From the doorway ran a network of wires.

They were emitting quivering, flashing electrical sparks—buzzing with vibratory snaps.

Each of the wires was as thick as the body of a snake. Chick needed only one look to tell him that they were stored with ten thousand deaths.

CHAPTER X.

A CORDON OF PERIL.

"Blocked!" muttered Chick.

There was a fascination about the peculiar and unexpected prospect that lay before the young detective.

He had chanced upon the cupola supply room of some electrical plant.

Chick could hear the dynamo machinery in some other part of the building.

Those bare live wires, resting on a solid bed of some non-conducting material, were shut in here where they could do no harm.

Opposite, in the fitful spark glow, Chick fancied he saw a large open space like a double doorway.

The young detective was a good deal puzzled.

"But where did the man go to?" he asked himself.

Chick could hardly have missed a break in the winding corridor.

He had groped slowly every foot of the way, his hands extended, and feeling along on each side of him.

"No thoroughfare yonder—that is certain," he soliloquized. "Here is a puzzle."

"What was that?" Chick suddenly exclaimed an instant later.

It seemed as if the environment, breathing vague menace and peril, was likewise haunted with an electrical acuteness that sharpened the senses.

A sound hovered along the corridor; Chick pressed back to the last turn he had made, bending his ear to catch and analyze the echo.

He braced, erect as there came a flare of light.

It flooded along the corridor.

Chick ventured to peer past the turn; his eye beheld the scene of the illumination.

"Plain enough now how my man disappeared!" he mused.

In the ceiling of the corridor a large drop trap had opened.

It extended downwards till its end was not five feet from the floor.

One man slid down—then a second.

Their faces were grimy; their hands so much so that their features were not clearly discernible.

Still, their dress did not carry the idea that they were workmen in a strictly proper sense.

"Send her up!" spoke the last man to drop to the floor.

"You have a glim?"

"Surely."

One of the men lifted his hand, and gave the doortrap a push.

Like the folding section of an upper sleeping car berth it shot back to place, solid.

The last speaker had brought out a lantern—a common bicycle lamp with a reflector.

Chick continued to watch.

He could not tell whether either of these two men was the one he had followed from the billboard.

He hoped to learn something by their familiarity with the traps and mystic stairways of this strange building.

Not for a moment did Chick suppose that they would turn in any direction save that of the only outside exit of which he was aware.

He drew back with considerable surprise and some trepidation, as they started slowly forward down the corridor directly towards the spot where he was.

"Coming this way!" muttered Chick, rapidly—"what for? They can't cross those wires!"

"Got the shoes?" spoke one voice.

"Yes."

"We string the wires to-night, then?"

"We must, or drop the lay. You got the warning."

"Carter!"

"The old Nick, in truth!"

"We played the game too fast."

"So we finished with the finale."

"The grand finale, truly!"

The last speaker laughed in a light, self-pleased way.

Chick had braced himself to meet the trouble that threatened.

The intimation conveyed by the man that some new, some further game, was on the boards, aroused his professional acumen and dulled any fears he might have entertained.

He once more glanced past the corridor turning.

That flashing glimpse decided Chick.

The men had paused momentarily, and one of them was drawing carefully from each large side pocket quite a voluminous parcel.

The parcels were done up in chamois skin.

He placed one under his arm—the other he unrolled.

"Glass shoes," murmured Chick; "they are going to cross those wires!"

He surmised that by insulating them—

selves the men could walk across the bare live wires, and could thus defy millions and millions of volts of electricity!

Chick's eyes sparkled in the darkness, and his pulses throbbed.

Behind him was the opportunity of a rush, a brawl, possibly a victory, for he could surprise the two fellows. But that meant their silencing.

Ahead was a fascinating outlook for the true detective instinct, even if the outlook were hedged in with tremendous danger.

These men were about to cross a pathway of death—there must be an enticing reward at its end.

To precede them, and watch them later, might lead to marked results of value.

Chick glanced across the spitting, spiteful wires, writhing like serpents.

One hand stole out; it seized one of the tall glass insulators lying in among the rubbish heap over which he had stumbled.

"Dare I?" he questioned himself.

He seized a second.

"I dare!" he uttered, fervently.

He strained his eyes across the dim space—a distance of full twenty feet.

The outlines of an open doorway, level with the floor, certainly showed there.

Chick recalled his technical knowledge of electricity, and hope brightened as his heart throbbed with confidence in his own supreme athletic powers.

The insulators allowed of a firm grasp and afforded a comparatively safe footrest.

The voices came nearer, the light kept advancing.

"Now!" murmured Chick.

He leaned beyond the doorway; he set one glass-protected hand firmly upon the wires—then the other.

Slowly he elevated one foot, steadied, posed—put one hand out, then a foot, then the second foot.

His breath came quickly; he had chosen his course, and was fairly in the vortex of destruction.

A miss, a slip, the waver of a muscle, meant annihilation!

Walking on hands and feet, the venturesome young detective accomplished ten feet.

A flash slightly unnerved him.

A cry, a shout told him that he had not been quick enough.

The light had turned the corridor, and now shone full upon him.

Its holder gasped a wild surprise:

"See there!"

"You don't know him?"

"I don't."

"A lunatic!"

"More like——"

"Don't worry, boys!" came floating from the opposite side of the cupola.

A thrill passed through Chick's frame.

A click, a snap, cut the air.

"Keep on, or drop, my friend," continued the cool, menacing tones directed at the wavering Chick, "just as you please, but I cover you with a seven-shooter, and when you arrive, hands up, instead of down, or I blow off the whole top of your head!"

CHAPTER X.

"INSULATED."

Shortly before nine o'clock that evening Nick Carter passed the Royal Trust institution.

He was not alone—Ida was on his arm.

Any person observing them would have taken them for some leisurely reputable merchant enjoying an evening stroll with his pretty daughter.

Nick gave the institution a keen glance.

There was nothing about it to particularly interest him.

The watchman had just made his rounds, and was descending the steps.

He waved his hand carelessly to the regular bank guardian, who stood at one of the large plate glass windows inside the institution.

Up stairs there was no light—the janitor's quarters were dark.

The shades of the room that housed the armless man were closely drawn.

Ida's eyes were in quite another direction while Nick was making this survey.

"All quiet and regular there, it seems," observed Nick, as they turned the corner.

"And Patsy is all right," reported the little lady detective.

"You saw him on that cab at the corner?"

"Yes."

"He is posted then. Now, Ida, a little more briskly. The hour set was nine?"

"Exactly."

"We must not miss connections. About this flower girl——"

"I ran across the flower girl at about dusk."

"Which she is not—in reality?"

"No, indeed. I came across her dressed in the height of style, but I knew her at once. She entered a fashionable restaurant. I sat at the next table, although she never took the trouble to observe me."

"And she met some one by appointment, you say?"

"Yes—a man came in a few minutes later."

"Not one of the criminal crowd, you think?"

"Nothing in that line. I should take him for some profligate high roller, who has run through his fortune and is desperate to make another in any way."

"And they agreed to meet again?"

"At precisely nine she was to meet him at a certain corner."

"Where we are going."

"Which we will very shortly reach, yes."

"What is the object of their meeting?"

"That I did not learn. The man was eager; he talked about money, heaps of it. The girl was all business; she told him to be prompt and straight, for he was dealing with a man who knew how to turn checks into rags, and who was not begging for customers."

"All that seems to connect," observed Nick.

"I think we are following up a sure clew," said Ida.

It was ten minutes later when Ida, by a simple movement, diverted Nick to cross a street.

"There is the girl," she whispered, motioning with her clever eyes.

"I see," observed Nick.

"And there comes the man."

"He is the one she met this afternoon?"

"Yes. What shall we do?"

"Follow."

"Separately?"

Nick nodded.

The girl and the man joined arms. They started up briskly.

After proceeding some three squares they came to a summer garden restaurant.

Very few people were in the dancing hall attachment, although some of its lights were lit.

The people Nick was shadowing went into the restaurant, passed through it, and gained a table pretty well shielded with evergreens set in wooden boxes.

Nick surveyed the situation. He entered the garden by a side gate.

Making sure that he was unperceived by the others, he lay down on a bench against the latticed side of a "private booth" of the garden.

The man with the flower girl called for some refreshments.

He treated the girl in a careless, familiar manner, and drank freely, but his eyes were constantly turned towards the street.

"See here, sis," he said, "I hope there is to be no failure?"

"Oh! he'll be here."

"And he can do what you say?"

"Certainly."

"I'll pay the thousand gladly, then. Is that the man?"

"That is Mr. Norris—yes."

Nick peered through the lattice interstices.

A man was approaching whom he had never seen before.

He was smart-looking and business-like in manner, but Nick traced the criminal nature in the restless, crafty eyes.

The girl arose.

"Mr. Norris," she said, "this is the gentleman who wished to see you on the business I told you about."

"Very well," nodded the last comer brusquely.

"A word with you, Della, before you go."

He drew her to one side. They came up to within two feet of the reclining Nick.

"You know what is up for to-night, I suppose?" said Norris.

"Yes," murmured the girl.

"Take this."

The man drew off a peculiar ring formed of serpentine discs of alternate gold and silver.

The girl placed it on her finger and looked inquiring.

"You are to go to the rear of the bank—you remember the place where a little passageway cuts in?"

The girl nodded.

"Wait there for instructions."

"But this ring?"

"Half the crowd do not know you. That will carry you through with all hands. You will wait and be ready if they need you."

"What may they need me for?"

"To carry messages."

"Oh—across?"

"Yes."

The girl nodded and started away. Nick turned his eyes aside as he caught the swish of a second dress skirt.

He made out Ida lining the boundary row of plants a few feet distant.

She, too, it was apparent, had overheard.

"Now then, my friend," spoke up Norris, to the man waiting at the table

"Good! Ready for me?"

"If you mean business."

"I certainly do."

Norris glanced all about the place, his keen eyes evidently on the alert for lurkers.

He came up to where Nick lay, scowled, looked over him and shook him.

"Wake up, here!" he called.

Nick uttered an unintelligent groan.

"Oh! some drunken fellow," said the waiting man, impatiently.

"I'll know that!"

Nick watched Norris narrowly from behind half-closed eyelids.

The other moved one hand inside his chest.

Then he placed something on Nick Carter's wrists.

It was with the utmost difficulty that staunch Nick Carter stood the surprise of the moment.

Somewhere upon him the man had a powerful battery.

This was not strange; Nick had already decided that he was his "electrical double" of the bank fraud.

Nick experienced a shock that was purely material, but he held his iron nerves firm.

"He'll do!" laughed Norris, lightly—"a dead man would nearly respond to that. What's he been drinking, I wonder—laudanum!"

The speaker sat down at the table opposite the other man.

"Now then," said the latter, eagerly, "you know what I want?"

"Our mutual friend, Della, has informed me—yes."

"You have something that destroys—evidence?"

"I have a patent eraser, yes."

"Electrical?"

"That is why it works—at once, quickly, effectively."

"Good! Can any one operate it?"

"Provided with my formula for loading the pressure cylinder, yes."

"Obliterates the writing from paper and leaves it blank?"

"It absorbs everything on a sheet of paper except the finish."

"Now, say—about some notes a fellow wanted to get out of the way?"

"If you can get one minute at the notes——"

"I can."

"They become waste paper."

"And in the case of—well, of wills?"

"One application destroys the signature."

The profligate's eyes sparkled.

Shrewd Ida had not been mistaken as to the status of this fellow.

He probably anticipated removing proofs of his own reckless forgeries—of tampering with the will of some displeased relative.

This Norris, this "electric man," had indeed in his possession a truly dangerous menace to business and society, as the banker had said!

"Have you the machine, the device, with you?" inquired "the customer."

"Yes."

"You sell it to me for a thousand dollars?"

"Not this one, but a duplicate."

"When?"

"To-morrow."

"I would like you to demonstrate the effect."

"What do you want to work on?"

"Well—there's an envelope, with the address in good black ink," said the other, producing it from his pocket.

"You want that writing obliterated?"

"Do that, and I'll say it's a bargain!"

Nick could not restrain the impulse to lift his head.

He could not see all that Norris did, but he could trace from his movements that some battery stored about him connected with a queer little contrivance of metal, glass and rubber that he held in one hand.

Attached to this was a wire running to a bone-handled gutta percha and zinc roller.

The customer had placed the envelope on the table.

Norris applied the roller.

Over it, once only the roller passed.

"Blank!" fairly gasped the astounded and delighted customer.

"Yes;" coolly nodded Norris.

"It will do that every time?"

"Never fails."

"Why! I can give an I. O. U., get hold of it later—Zip! One touch——"

"And you owe nothing."

"I can get that will—never mind. Say! I take the machine."

"Very well."

"I will be here at this time to-morrow evening with the thousand dollars."

"And I will be here with the machine. Good-evening."

It was evident that Norris wanted to be alone, or, at least, did not care to leave the garden in company with the other.

His customer bowed and departed.

Norris backed toward the private booth, entered it and drew off his coat.

Keeping an eye out, he began to unwind various wires from his body.

"I don't want to be hampered by this arrangement, with to-night's business on hand," Nick distinctly heard him mutter.

His elastic armature was like some harness.

He reached both hands behind him to unsnap two catches connecting wires running from the waist to the shoulders, where some part of the electric eraser evidently rested.

Norris had some trouble detaching the hooks—his finger fumbled.

Nick looked about the place; no one was in sight.

He had the fellow "red-handed!"

Quickly the detective slipped a hand into his hip pocket.

Noiselessly he drew forth a shining pair of handcuffs.

There was an unexpected snap—two of them.

Like a madman, Norris turned, half-divining his dilemma.

"Insulated, my friend!" observed Nick Carter, coolly.

CHAPTER XI.

MAKING COMBINATIONS.

The "electric man," Nick Carter's double, Norris, broke forth in violent curses.

Helplessly handcuffed though he was, he rushed upon his captor.

Nick never moved, but met him with an eye that quelled him.

"What cheap trickery is this?" panted the prisoner.

"Insulated," said Nick, coolly; "now we will see about being isolated."

"You don't mean to say that I am arrested!" brazened Norris.

"Why, yes—about that."

"You are making a serious mistake. I tell you——"

"You can tell them at the station house," suggested the detective.

"I can convince you or them that I am——"

"Mr. Nicholas Carter?"

"Hah! Say, are you?"

"Perhaps."

The prisoner hung his head and began to mutter under his breath.

He made no resistance as Nick forced him through a side exit of the summer garden to the street and into a cab.

But the prisoner was constantly alert. Along the brilliantly lighted thoroughfares clear up to the police station, with eager desperation he scanned every person on the pavements.

Nick sat by the man's side, ready to check the evident warning direction he would have shouted to accomplices had he met such.

Nick carefully removed the electrical harness, and "the eraser," from Norris' body.

It comprised "dead-sure" evidence against the prisoner. Nick suggested a single query.

"Norris," he asked, "are those 'wires' ready yet?"

The prisoner started, scowled, fixed a

murderous look on Nick, and was silent.

Nick left the station. He was satisfied that he had the king-bee of the case in custody.

He might have put in some time forcing a cross-examination, but a memory of the flower girl suggested a new line ready for exploration.

Nick had overheard all that Norris had told this girl.

He called her Della, and he had presented her with a ring.

Norris had apprized her in detail where she was to post herself—near the bank—to act the ally, the messenger, in some plan of the night.

Nick believed that Ida also had overheard this interview between man and girl at the summer garden.

Certainly Nick had seen Ida leave a lattice guard as the flower girl moved away.

As the detective neared the bank, therefore, he kept eyes and ears pretty well on the alert, believing that Ida would be on the spot.

Nick passed the bank on the opposite side of the street.

To his surprise, he received no signal to indicate that Patsy was lurking in the vicinity, as he had been informed.

He could dimly see the form of the inside watchman in a chair just beyond a bank window.

The cap, the head, were visible; before the vaults the drop lights shone full on the glistening metal doors.

Up stairs there was neither light nor movement.

Nick passed along in the shadow. He was bent on a detour that would bring him around to the spot where Norris had ordered the girl Della to post herself.

Nick passed the billboard with little realization of the interest it had held for his energetic young assistant, Chick, an hour or more earlier.

As he reached its end, the detective came to a sudden halt.

Above the mingled sounds rising from the streets, a low whistle seemed blended into an answering one.

"Aloft?" questioned Nick, quickly, lifting his gaze.

A brisk whir followed the whistling sounds.

Like a long snake uncoiling, some-

thing thick, rubbery, tailed a line of bellying black across the street.

It shot straight to the roof of a building opposite the one at the end of the billboard.

Nick discerned it to be a heavy wire almost the thickness of a human finger.

It began to lose its lax sway—it moved along.

Nick followed it with his eyes till he saw it carried diagonally to the roof of the bank building.

"Wait for the wires?" quoted Nick, from the message in the papier-mache apple. "The work is going on without its main director, it seems.

"There is 'a connection' between this building and the bank.

"A wire has been stretched—a big one. I am beginning to guess. Now, for the flower girl!"

Nick came around behind the bank.

Here was a space leading most conveniently into shadow.

He made out a form—he could not mistake the hat, veil and dress of the girl to whom Norris had given his mysterious instructions and a ring. The girl was standing motionless, looking into the dark court-like space, her back to the street.

"The game seems in play," muttered Nick. "I shall take a hand."

He glided noiselessly directly up behind this posted sentinel.

"Wanted, young lady!" observed Nick.

He clasped the girl by an arm and wheeled her about, ready to silence her if she attempted to cry out a warning.

She did not even quiver.

Very tranquilly the veiled face was lifted to Nick's own.

"What for?" interrogated Ida.

"Zounds!" Nick was forced to exclaim from sheer admiration—"you make up well."

"That was the easy part of it."

"Where is your model?"

"Safe and harmless."

"What is the hard part?"

Ida pointed down the dark court.

"Two men passed me here," she said.

"How long since?"

"About half an hour ago."

"Go on, Ida."

"They had ropes, carpet sacks—they reminded me of telegraph line-repairers."

"It fits," nodded Nick.

Ida was extending a key.

"One of them gave me this," she explained. "What is it for?"

"When you hear this," the man said—"Ida's pretty lips puckered to an imitative whistle—"go ahead. Start away, get a cab, and bring the others to Norris."

"The others?" repeated Nick, thoughtfully.

"Yes."

"Where are those others, Ida, do you suppose?"

"I don't know, for I didn't dare ask."

"Oh, certainly not. But I think I know."

"When the signal comes."

"It will not come till I have seen you again, Ida," apprized Nick. "Remain here at your post while I look into matters."

Nick went into the shadows.

Where an angle was formed by two walls he found a dangling rope. Up twelve feet it was secured to the bar of a window, of which two companion bars were missing.

Nick ascended. He knew instantly where he was—upon a landing of the stairway that led to the upper rooms of the bank.

Light guided him. Nick noiselessly continued an ascent.

He reached a hall; at its end was the door of a room, half ajar.

Nick reached it; he peered in.

A strange spectacle greeted his vision.

Dressed for the street, the armless man was evidently waiting for something to happen or somebody to appear.

Meantime, he was not idle.

He was half leaning over a table.

Upon a sheet of paper he was—figuring.

With skill and intelligence, Brewer was dashing off the numbers——

With his mouth!

That is, a fountain pen between his lips, the armless man was showing his proficiency as a mathematician and a scholar.

The mystery of the unique forgeries was a mystery no longer!

CHAPTER XII.

BY THE BLINDFOLD ROUTE.

Nick crept up behind the armless man.

Brewer had written names, and opposite them placed definite amounts.

The finely-formed letters showed Nick the work of a phenomenon.

There were armless freaks who wrote with their feet—this man used lips and teeth.

It was he who had committed the extensive check forgeries. Above suspicion on account of his apparent helplessness, he had free access to any part of the bank—could scan checks, deposits, the signature book.

Nick understood that some final swoop on the bank was in progress—Brewer was "estimating profits," while waiting for its execution.

Before the astounded cripple could catch his breath, he found himself gagged and his feet secured.

He stared blankly at cool Nick Carter, as the latter pushed him out of sight under a bed.

The detective passed through two rooms and came to an opening in the floor, just sawed out.

There was a taint of drugs in the air.

Over on a lounge lay a form, motionless—that of the janitor.

A hole in the ceiling corresponded to the one in the floor.

Through both passed two heavy black wires.

Caught by hooks to the floor was a rope ladder. Nick descended.

He was now in an entry adjoining the bank president's room.

Nick approached a door held open by a satchel.

Kneeling before a vault space were two men.

One with a pair of pincers held a small contrivance into which ran the wires.

The other had a kindred appliance pressed under the combination.

"Ready?"

"There's a frightful current on!"

"Yes—I told them to steal the fullest force possible."

"Let her go!"

"Set! If that voltage doesn't turn the steel to tissue paper in fifteen seconds, our electrical pal is a fraud!"

Nick reached for a letter book lying on a chair.

He gave it a fling; it met the wire with force and suddenness.

With a hiss, a flare, its end struck one of the manipulators.

His body straightened up; then he fell back flat, and lay as still as if electrocuted.

The other came erect with alarm.

"These?" insinuated Nick, exhibiting a pair of handcuffs, "or this?" and he showed a revolver.

Gagged, chained to a safe, the man knew it was "all day!" with scheme and schemers.

Nick proceeded through the entry connecting with the counting-room.

He stumbled over a form; it was that of the watchman.

Nick traced the dope influence here, also; the crafty Brewer had got in some sure work with the night force.

Nick surprisedly observed at the window the form he had noticed on passing outside.

"A dummy," murmured Nick.

He glanced from the side window; opposite, in shadow, Nick made out a group.

There was the glitter of uniform buttons—the police. There was a form in their van—Patsy.

Nick lifted the window—out fluttered his handkerchief, on signal code.

Patsy crossed the street.

"Officers?" interrogated Nick.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"That dummy at the window."

"Ah! you guessed that?"

"And provided for exigencies in case you did not appear to explain."

"Very well. Tell your force to remain in reserve."

"All right."

"Have you your cab here?"

"Near here."

"Come around to the rear of the bank."

Patsy vanished. Nick retraced the course he had taken in reaching the bank floor.

Ida was awaiting him in suspense.

"Give me the key and the ring," directed Nick.

Nick explained the proximity of the

police contingent, and imparted definite instructions.

Patsy was at the curb.

"Drive around into the next street," ordered Nick.

"Where the bank fronts?"

"Yes."

Nick studied the wire overhead as they did this.

He scrutinized the building at the side of the billboard.

It was vacant. Its door platforms looked rusted and little used.

"Around to the rear—there seems a driveway there," suggested Nick.

Five minutes later Nick Carter had found a lock which the key fitted.

"The order is death!"

Secured to a chair in a room in the building beyond the electric light cupola, Chick heard his doom pronounced.

To the chair ran wires from a battery in one corner.

A man stood at Chick's side—a second had his hand upon the switch plate lever at the wall.

The damning suspicion had gained belief that Chick was "one of Nick Carter's men!"

Chick had been secured to the chair for nearly two hours.

During that time the men left the room by turns.

They spoke of "splicing," "increasing the voltage," "sending the wire across," and Chick had some active guesses.

Now, this work finished, they were ready to finish him!

"Anything to say?" demanded the fellow at the switch.

"Nothing whatever," announced Chick, calmly.

"Let her go!"

"Hustle—you fellows!"

"Hello?"

The switch lever had moved—Chick gave a convulsive gasp.

His head dropped on his breast.

"Electrocuted!" announced the villain, standing beside him—then he stared towards the form that had challenged from the shadowy end of the room.

"Who are you?" he demanded, suspiciously.

"From Norris," announced Nick Carter.

"How did you get here?"

"With Norris' key, of course."

"We don't know you."

"Do you know that ring?"

Just here a third man entered.

Attention was immediately distracted from Chick to Nick.

"Look here!" said Nick, hurriedly—"hustle, I say—those are the orders."

"The job across the street—"

"Finished. You are to come to Norris."

"That was the agreement, yes. Did they make the haul?"

"You're settled for life, boys!" exclaimed Nick, cheerily. "Leave everything. You can come back later."

"No need—we've settled the only spy."

The ring, the key, Nick's familiarity with Norris, with "the job," made it easy for him to hurry the trio to the open air, where the cab was waiting.

They crowded into it—Patsy had his orders. He started up briskly.

"Now, then—in turn!" said Nick.

He produced three handkerchiefs.

"What's that?" inquired the trio in a surprised breath.

"Blindfold."

"What?"

"Instructions."

"Nonsense!"

"Norris is foxy. A division is square enough, but you come in and you go out of his new secret den on the blindfold basis."

"Humph!"

"Or not at all."

The men demurred, scolded. They thought of the plunder, and—assented.

This was the picture they presented ten minutes later.

Led by Nick, they removed their bandages to find themselves fronting a captain of police in a station house cell room.

They gave vent to a triple shout of concern, of alarm.

Nick waved his hand lightly.

"Gentlemen!" he observed, "I said that you should meet Norris. He is yonder."

"Sold!" shouted one of the trio.

Nick had pointed to a cell door.

Beyond its grating showed the pale face of Norris, "Nick Carter's double," "the electric man!"

"And Chick?"

Ida pressed the query anxiously.

"I sent him home," declared Nick.

The bank tangle had been adjusted—the armless man and the two vault operators had joined their comrades.

"But the electrocution—that lever, that battery?"

"That battery, Ida," apprized Nick, smilingly, "had been tampered with!"

"Oh!"

"By something of an expert in the electric line."

"Yourself?"

"I disconnected," said Nick, "as I entered the room where Chick was. He was shrewd enough to recognize my voice—and he played it fine!"

"Then the case is wound up?" observed Patsy, starting for the bank door, which a quartette of policemen guarded.

"Practically. But that flower girl, Ida?"

"Locked in a room not six squares away."

"The round-up is complete, then," said Nick. "It is something more than a simple case for us, Ida."

"Indeed?"

"Yes, I find in the caged group three members of the crowd that once trained with that notorious criminal—the doctor."

"Dr. Purdue!"

"So, this final catch clears the board of the last dangerous confederates of that infamous criminal and plotter!" announced Nick Carter.

THE END.

The next number of the Nick Carter Weekly will contain "Nick Carter and the Sawdust Man; or, An Investment that Caused Trouble."

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